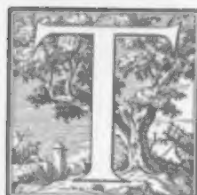


The Rescue: A Story for Mothers

By Georgia Wood Pangborn



THE nurse-girl, Fanny, came back to the baby-carriage with the dazed, reminiscent smile that clings to a girl's face long after the delightful hour of a good flirtation is over. It is like the afterglow of a beautiful sunset, or the trail of sachet that cheap fiery drags after it through the street. A half-glance showed everything to be as she had left it. The heavy embroidered afghan was drawn up so that little Thomas Van Dusen was quite invisible, and nobody could have told whether he had his rubber-and-bone "pacifier" or not. Fanny had purchased that necessary article out of her own money, and did not want it confiscated as the first had been by the busybody aunt who was always "snoopin' round" and telling what Thomas' mother would have wished if she hadn't been obliged to go so suddenly somewhere else, as soon as Thomas came.

How people ever managed without pacifiers Fanny couldn't think. It sure does quiet them wonderful. And then, if you keep a bottle of soothing-syrup handy, you can really manage to have most of your time to yourself when you have 'em out. Course you gotta have tact. Fanny had indeed lost her last place over a question of the pacifier; still, some didn't care a bit. Fanny liked sensible people. The present Mrs. Van Dusen was one. Fanny had been afraid before Mrs. Van Dusen No. 2 had come—two months ago—that she might be a snooper like the aunt who had kept house after little Thomas' mother died until Thomas' father could get another wife. This aunt was always rowing over the bottles and things; indeed, she had prepared the feedings herself, and Fanny had had nothing to do but take Thomas into the park. Still, as she capably said, she really liked to do it all herself. She loved babies. But Mrs. Van Dusen No. 2 made no trouble at all. She was a real lady.

So little Thomas had been given his "medicine"; his feeble protests were corked up with a pacifier, and his afghan drawn up over him so that if any meddling aunts came along one could say, "The baby is asleep." As to the afghan, it was one that the snooping aunt had made herself—white elder-down trimmed with blue. Rather too warm for summer, possibly, but pretty enough to look at. The aunt had also made an embroidered thing for hot weather, but it had disappeared, somehow or other,—in the laundry Fanny would have said had anyone inquired; but no one did. Fanny had a new shirt-waist which she said she had embroidered herself, but she would not have liked the aunt to see it. It was a hot day, and the carriage stood just out of the shadow of the tree under which Fanny sat and read. When she first sat down, the carriage had been in shadow too, but it is surprising how quickly the sun will move sometimes. She could still reach it with her foot, however, and every now and then jiggle it so that anybody could see without half looking that she was earning her wages all right.

Once a velvet but stern old voice sounded through the haze of golden romance that filled her head. "You boil dat chile's brains," it said. "Why don't you take him outa de sun?" She looked over vaguely into a face that was black and wrinkled, and very plain to look upon, except for the eyes, which, through their gold-rimmed spectacles, were as soft and dark as a tropical night. Dim with age, maybe. The event proved that there was something strange about their sight; but whether it was dimness—that is as one thinks.

"Some folks," Fanny answered, "might mind their own business." She had jerked the carriage partly into shadow none the less, though not so far but that presently the sun found it again. A faint cry came from under the afghan at the sudden movement. It may have been five o'clock when she saw her "gen'm'n friend." Then she said hurriedly to the other nurse, "Say, just watch him a second, will you? If he cries slap him."

He did cry a little in a discouraged way, but Nurse No. 2 did not slap him; she drew him into the shadow.

When Fanny came back, the black nurse was gone. "Well, I do think she might've waited," said Fanny. So now Fanny placed her foot on the carriage and jiggled it for a while, reminiscently smiling into space; and then, as it was dinner-time, turned smartly out of the park, and homeward. But when she pulled the afghan down to pick him out and take him up the steps—he was not there!

The sour-smelling little pacifier still lay on the pillow, and Fanny pocketed that instinctively before she began to scream. The first person who reached her was Thomas Van Dusen's father; the next was a policeman, who mechanically put his white glove above her elbow; and, as the police station was on the next block, it seemed feasible to get there as soon as possible.

Things moved rapidly then. They do when it is a question of a lost child, for police lieutenants are very apt to have children of their own. Lost jewels and purses are less personal matters. So within an hour an indignant black mammy stood before the rail, still wearing the apron of service and with her smart cap awry with anger.

"I didn't see no harm," sniffed Fanny, "in askin' her to mind the carriage a minute. She looked like she belonged to nice folks. She was just goin' off when I came back. I thought she might've waited."

"Judge, yo' Honor," said Nurse No. 2, "I did wait until the lady came, though it was time for my baby to go home."

"She says you didn't."

"Shef. Dat po' white trash? I didn't call her no lady. No, yo' Honor! no, suh! The baby's mother came."

"The child's mother is dead," said Mr. Van Dusen. "The present Mrs. Van Dusen is in Atlantic City."

The old black face wrinkled with bewilderment, which presently changed to awed surprise and mysteriousness. "Why did you think that person was the child's mother?" asked the officer with some curiosity.

"'Cause she was so aggravated. De baby had a pacifier, and dat girl had given him medicine out'en a bottle to keep him quiet. I was jus' bendin' over for a look at him myself w'en dat heavy cover was snatched away. It fair took my breff—so quick. And I saw de lady holding him up close, and looking over at de nurse where she stood talkin' wif her gen'm'n friend."

"What was she like, Anny?"

"Tall," considered the old woman. "Dark, very white; but mos'ly I noticed how angry she was, and I thought 'dat girl's gwine get her commuppence.' I don't think," said she thoughtfully, "I ever saw a white lady so mad befo'."

"How was she dressed?"

"I disremember."

"Would you know her if you saw her again?"

"I do' know, suh. My eyes is dim; I could see she was quality."

"Have you a relative, Mr. Van Dusen, who could—"

"My dead wife's sister. It does not describe her at all."

"She had purple beads around her neck," vouchsafed Anny.

"Amethysts!" exclaimed Mr. Van Dusen, seeming greatly shaken.

"I guess so, big an' purple."

Mr. Van Dusen drew from his pocket a photograph of two faces—one lovely, the other plain—pressed cheek to cheek.

Mammy adjusted her spectacles. "Yassir, dat's de lady," said she, quietly pointing to the lovely one, "but dat's de other one."

"You may as well throw out this evidence," said Mr. Van Dusen in a harsh, unsteady voice. "That is my dead wife."

"And the other?"

"My wife's sister."

"Very straight an' tall, she was," repeated Anny vaguely. "Only jes how it was, she put him in the other lady's arms; at first I thought it was two persons doin' the same thing, but the tall one went away, an' the short, fat one—about my build—she carried him away."

The Lieutenant came from behind his desk, and poked into the pillows of the baby-carriage himself as though he expected that Thomas Van Dusen might still be hidden among them, or have left a written message. The afternoon's bottle rolled out upon the floor, and was broken. The milk in it had soured to white jelly. The Lieutenant knew something of babies.

"The child's aunt was fond of him," he suggested.

"I—believe so," stammered Mr. Van Dusen, flushing slightly. "We are not on good terms."

"You will probably find the child with her," said the Lieutenant, retiring behind his railing. "You can telephone," he suggested, indicating a convenient instrument.

And the telephone presently stated that the Lieutenant's guess was correct. Little Thomas Van Dusen was with his aunt. Apparently the telephone was emphatic, because Mr. Van Dusen held it to his ear for some time. And the ringing off was done at the other end, for he hung up the receiver without a word at last.

"Do you wish her arrested for kidnapping?" asked the Lieutenant coldly.

"Certainly not," answered Mr. Van Dusen.

"And no complaint of any sort to be lodged against the maid, I suppose?"

"Against me!" screamed Fanny.

"I've got a wife," the Lieutenant remarked. "who'd want me to hold you for attempted murder. Glad your trouble has cleared up so easily, sir," he said pleasantly to Mr. Van Dusen. "Good-evening."

Mr. Van Dusen, leaving Fanny in charge of the empty carriage, ordered a taxicab, but as he was halted with other traffic at a Fifty-ninth Street corner, he saw a squat black figure, with white apron and crooked cap, poised uncertainly, and peering at the cars from huge gold-bowed spectacles.

"What could she tell me?" he thought with a shiver that was half of hope, half of fear. "Auntie, I'm going your way," he called.

With a wide, gleaming smile she plowed her way loftily through the rest of the crowd, and took her place in the cab like a queen in a chariot. And her voice in the simple words of "Thank you, suh," was a wonder of honey and cream, and drowsy poppy-fields, and velvet, and a church organ. Such a voice! Is that why the babies love them so? Why, there's all of fairyland in a mammy's voice.

"Tell me again what you saw, Auntie."

She chuckled her racial "Heh-heh," then turned portentous and mysterious.

"Tain't de first time it's happened," said she, "nor 'twon't be de last. 'Tain' you an' me, suh, dat's gwine keep the mothers 'furn comin' back to de babies. No, suh. Dey can't he'p it."

They say that other-world presences make themselves felt in the spinal marrow of the living. Mr. Van Dusen felt himself oddly thrilled and weak. It may have been the dramatic power of her voice.

"I hope, suh, you'm a good Christian?" she solemnly purred.

"Why—I hope I am, Auntie."

"Bress de Lo'd for dat! Den you mus' know He 'lows many things to de po' anxious souls dat have gone befo' us. Ef a lady's died, an' sees wuffless po' white trash givin' sour bottles to her baby, an' letten 'em bile 'is brains in de hot sun, d'you s'pose de good Lo'd ain't gwine let her come back to see about it when she takes a bo'l' of 'His feet an' prays 'Him'?"

Mr. Van Dusen hid his working face with his hands.

"D'you ever think, suh, whar de little tiny babies goes when dey's a-sleepin'?" 'Tain't de way grown-ups sleep. Now, I tell you—dey goes whar de good dead folks goes. I know. An' ef de'r mothers is dead, dey jes' goes right and tells 'em how de worl's treatin' 'em. Yes, dey does. An' at sleepy time, de dead mothers, dey stan' in de fiel's o' glory, reachin' up de'r arms, an' de babies dey come down to 'em, right froo de sky—floatin' an' a floatin'. An' de mothers, dey catch 'em, an' hug 'em, an' kiss 'em, an' look 'em all over to see dey ain't no lil' tiny hurt place nor any tear 'at didn't have to be. An' dey looks to see dat de lil' clo'es is all clean an' sweet, an' dey count 'is toes, an' feel to see ef a toof's comin'. An' ef she fin's he's been havin' sour bottles an' bilin' his brains in de sun, she jes' goes an' shows him to de Lo'd, an' she says, 'Now, please, Marster, I gotta go back, else you'll have to let me keep my baby here!'—dat's w'at she says, says she. 'I ain't gwine have my baby 'bused,' says she. 'I ain't gwine have him given sour bottles by a sassy nurse-maid, an' slapped w'en he cries. I got to go back, please, Marster!' An' He says, says He, 'I ain't keepin' you,' says He. 'But de goin' back's terrible hard.' 'W'at do I care for dat?' says she, an' she runs, though it's harder'n knives an' icicles to de po' feet of de good ones that comes back dat way; but she comes to her baby."

"Does she?" whispered Mr. Van Dusen, his eyes still hidden by his hands.

"I spec' I done say a lot o' things dat seems great foolishness to white folks," she said humbly. "I had six babies of my own—all dead but one, and him in de chain-gang. Bress de Lo'd dat took de five! An' I took care of mo' white babies 'n I can count in my time. When I had my black baby, I had always enough for him and for a white baby, too. It's been babies, babies, for me sence I was of enough to stagger 'round wif my Miss Ellen in my arms. I don't know books, but I knows a heap 'bout mothers an' babies—a heap, I does. An' I tell you, Mar's, you can't keep 'em 'furn comin' back ef you ain't doin' right w'at dey lef' you. Here's my house," said Mammy. "An' dat po' white English better ain't take in de carriage yet, an' all de city dirt'll be on de pillow. Le' me get out."

Mr. Van Dusen looked back to see her gathering all the finery from the carriage with angry flirts.

Little Thomas Van Dusen was being rocked to sleep. That was the only thing that the snooping aunt had done as yet contrary to the directions of the medical gentleman who had come and laid down the law as to what must be done if little Thomas was ever to weigh more than the inadequate ten pounds which was all his emaciated body could make the scales allow him.

"In marasmus cases," the doctor had begun, and then had become very technical, and after that carefully explanatory in words of one or two syllables. When all the details had been gone over exhaustively, he shook hands very hard with the snooping aunt, and said that, if she got into any trouble by what she had done, he would back her up with any number of affidavits, and would see that the child's parents were declared unfit guardians.

"You hold on to him!" said he.

And so after all other directions had been followed, including the preparation of a marvelous bottle that from first to last was as much trouble as a seven-course dinner, she held on, literally, cuddling him deep in her cushiony arms, which the black mammy had compared to her own. Little Thomas had slowly taken three ounces of that life-saving mixture before he fell asleep, and she found herself quite too tired to rise from her chair and lay him in the improvised crib, but she was very careful not to let any tears fall on the little face that looked so thin and old.

And so she was sitting, wiping her eyes very hard with her free hand, when a wild-looking man came softly in upon them.

"You can't have him," she said in a whisper as savage as a snake's hiss.

"I've come," he whispered back, "just to see him. I won't take him—I thought—I thought—I was going to have a home again, and—mother for him—she said that he was treated all right. I knew he wasn't thriving, but what does a man know?"

"Nothing," whispered the snooping aunt.

And then she softly, very softly, laid Thomas among the pillows, and went into another room where they might talk with less difficulty.

"Isabel, it was you that took him?"

"Who else? Horace, I've lain awake night after night since your new wife sent me off. Your baby has been crying to me—and so has she. If I have slept, she has come to me crying and crying; and so, to-day, when I went into the park, I was nearly wild. And when I saw that great, heavy afghan that I made for him last winter smothering him, and when I looked at his little face all screwed up around that pacifier, what could I do? I did what Emily wanted me to do."

"May I come and see him sometimes?" asked Mr. Van Dusen dearly.

"Oh, yes, Horace, yes! Forgive me, I didn't mean to be harsh—"

"Do you remember an old black woman that was near you when you took him?"

"No; I don't remember anything at all after leaving the house, until I took him out of his carriage and brought him home. I was too wretched to know what I did."

"There was no one with you, then?"

"Who could there be?"

Mr. Van Dusen sat down weakly with his head in his hands, and told all that he knew. And the snooping aunt said that the old colored woman was perfectly right, of course. Anybody of any sense at all must know that—that—such things are true. If they weren't, what would be the reason of anything?